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Liberals Reluctant to Punish 'Defector'

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House Democratic liberals, who punished two Goldwater defectors in 1964, are less enthusiastic about conferring what could be helpful martyrdom on the one obvious backslider of 1968—Rep. John R. Rarick (D-La.).

Liberal researchers say Rarick is the only House Democrat so far discovered who openly supported third-party candidate George C. Wallace. The precedent set in 1964 was to strip committee seniority from John Bell Williams (Miss.) and AAlbert W. Watson (S.C.) for endorsing Republican Barry Goldwater.

The action deprived Williams of the chairmanship of the House Commerce Committee, but he went on to become governor of Mississippi. Watson resigned his seat and was re-elected as a Republican.

Rep. James G. O'Hara (D-Mich.), chairman of the Democratic Study Group that demanded punishment of defectors four years ago, showed almost no enthusiasm yesterday for action that could strip little seniority from one-termer Rarick. It was believed that such action might build him up for the governorship, which he sought and lost last year.

Lives on Precedents

But liberals also are confronted with the fact that the House lives on precedents. If they fail to move against Rarick this year, they may be unable to impose party discipline in the future.

Though Rarick is the only outright Wallace supporter discovered so far, there are some close cases, such as Rep. L. Mendel Rivers (D-S.C.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

Rivers appeared at a fund-raising affair for Wallace in Maryland last June. Last month, he said he hoped the presidential election was thrown into the House to give the South a voice.

More Attainable Goals

Leaders of the study group —an organization of House Democratic liberals formed 10 years ago to push legislation —planned a post-election meeting yesterday to discuss this and other issues. But they were snowed out.

Some want to change the House Democratic leadership to bring in younger blood, but they appear to lack the votes to dump Speaker John W. McCormack. They probably will concentrate on more attainable goals, such as filling a Ways and Means Committee vacancy with a liberal.

The study group also must redefine its own role in the House. For the last eight years, it has concentrated on passing Administration programs. The issues it was organized to fight for a decade have been enacted.